Editorial

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On Safe Places

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This special issue was designed as a response to several events that have brought the idea of safety, or lack thereof, to the forefront of academic, political, social, and cultural debates. When it was first proposed to *Open Cultural Studies*, Europe was in upheaval, still grappling with the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February of 2022 and the images of millions of people, especially women and children, rapidly fleeing the country to seek protection and assistance elsewhere. This scenario, along with the recurring news about the refugee and migrant crisis and the waves of people desperately trying to cross European borders to find asylum, compelled us to reflect on their condition as being "out of place" (Cresswell, 1996). We wanted to consider what kind of safe zones they encounter when crossing borders, when they are not allowed to cross them, or even when they decide to stay.

By using (in)voluntary mobility and the hope of a new start as our departing point, we were interested in thinking about circumstances in which the idea of (un)safety is at play. Three contexts came to our minds immediately: First, the COVID-19 pandemic and how it forced people, on the one hand, to isolate and avoid the spreading of the potentially deadly virus under the slogan "stay home, stay safe," on the other hand, to incorporate into their daily routines several practices of social distancing and personal hygiene to mitigate the health crisis and save lives.

Second, the technological revolution and how it has drastically changed how people relate to each other communicate, as well as how information is stored and exchanged. A by-product of technological advances and the consequent digitalization of life is, of course, the misuse of technology, which elevates risk for users (sharing personal or sensitive data, identity fraud, hacking activities, corporate espionage, cyberbullying, internet addiction, etc.). Furthermore, emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence and their dual use as both a threat and an ally also appeared as relevant topics of discussion. AI may bring on several other risks: job losses, bias, data leak and theft, or the application of systems such as facial recognition to normalize mass surveillance and track and monitor minority groups. Simultaneously, it can be used to enhance safety by reducing human error, identifying anomalies and potential hazards, or offering predictive insights, among others. Overall, technology can facilitate life and access to information and entertainment. Cinema, literature, and the arts in general, more accessible than ever with a simple click or tap, offer a welcome distraction to the anxiety of our fast-moving times and function as a sort of refuge from reality. They can also mediate between languages and cultures and, hence, foster the imagination of different scenarios. As a matter of fact, these and other artistic domains might constitute safe places not only for audiences but also for the authors and the participants involved. Creative processes provide enough affect and intimacy to help them cope with identity issues and come to terms with violent events and transforming experiences.

Finally, third, the environmental emergency and how it has contributed to a significant shift in the way we understand our place in the world and our relationship with it. In the face of such huge challenges, urban and neo-rural villages and communities, as well as mindful living practices, have (re)emerged across the globe as intentional, sustainable, and regenerative options, providing a sense of safety against the destructive power of extractive industries and fast-paced lifestyles.

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Considering all the aforementioned facts, this special issue proposes to discuss the notion of "safe places" in contemporary culture and explore its multiple meanings and associations. Given the topic and its concurrently local and global character, our intention was always to look at it from different prisms, without being circumscribed to one specific area of study, theoretical or methodological approach, object, or thematic focus. We were looking for contributions that could tackle the idea of a safe place from different perspectives and raise distinctive questions by exploring safe places as physical, digital and symbolic, real and fictional. We wanted to study safe places as ways to both build and unbuild walls, thus regarding them as secure zones – sources of protection, forms of defense, or shelters where no harm can be done – and as places of comfort, familiarity, healing, openness, uncertainty, and vulnerability.

Our use of the word "place" was not random but an intentional choice. Even though the expression "safe space" seems to be more common, especially in regard to the school environment (Ali, 2017; Winter & Bramberger, 2021) and humanitarian settings, our decision to focus on "safe places" instead derives from Tuan's conception of places "as security" (1977, p. 3), Buell's idea of places as spaces of meaning and value (2001, p. 59), Relph's understanding of places as "fields of care" (1976, p. 38), and Cresswell's considerations on place as bringing together the spatial and social dimensions, combining location (where), locale (the material setting for social relationships), and a sense of place (the feelings and emotions it arouses) (1996, p. 156; 2004, p. 7).

Tuan (1977, p. 6) contends that place involves a pause in movement that allows us to get to know a specific space better and develop a certain attachment to it. The term can be employed in manifold ways, usually to convey a sense of belonging and intimate knowledge, for example, when we refer to our home, "our place," to "suggest ownership or some kind of connection" (Cresswell, 2004, p. 1). Furthermore, throughout our lives, we can experience multiple different places, with their own meanings: "the range of sites that can count as 'places' is infinitely great" (Buell, 2001, p. 60). And they "can be as small as the corner of a room or large as the earth itself" (Tuan, 1979, pp. 420–421). As opposed to other terms such as space, site, location, area, or zone, just to name a few, which tend to designate physical settings, the word place operates differently, presupposing a certain emotional connection, dwelling, and affection.

The notion of place occupies a central role in our existence. For Harcourt (2016, p. 161), our understanding of reality and surrounding circumstances is "foremost informed by our experience of place – the geographic location where we live, work, and interact with nature and people. Our identity, culture, history, and politics are bound up in a sense of place." And despite the changes brought by the digital world and the space–time contraction, place remains a fundamental concept in the twenty-first century: "The concern for 'sense of place' is acquiring renewed popular urgency because of globalization and environmental destruction" (Berland, 2005, p. 258). In this context, as people move more and more in these accelerated, liquid times (Bauman, 2007), marked by rootlessness and displacement, or "placelessness" in the words of Relph (1976), there is a growing desire to hold on to certain places, to protect and conserve them. This is the reasoning behind the preservation of many parks, small villages, beaches and other landscapes that function as an escape from the frenzy of urban life and a place for soul and identity searching.

In a world under imminent threat as a result of environmental degradation and the escalation of armed conflicts in Europe and the Middle East, thinking about the planet as a "center of felt value" (Tuan, 1977, p. 4) could be a motor for the development of a "language of positive change" (Mauch, 2019, p. 18) and a politics of resistance against human ineptitude and different crises.

Regarding the environmental emergency, the planet cannot be perceived as a mere landscape, "a visual idea" we look at from the outside (Cresswell, 2004, p. 10). The notion of place helps achieve that, for it is "a way of seeing, knowing and understanding the world. When we look at the world as a world of places we see different things. We see attachments and connections between people and place. We see worlds of meaning and experience" (Cresswell, 2004, p. 11). This is in line with Buell's claim that "[t]he more a site feels like a place, the more fervently it is so cherished, the greater the potential concern at its violation or even the possibility of violation" (2001, p. 56). Indifference can be fought with meaning and feeling, with a sense of familiarity and attachment. As Relph puts it:

> In both our communal and our personal experience of places there is often a close attachment, a familiarity that is part of knowing and being known here, in this particular place. It is this attachment that constitutes our roots in places; and the familiarity that this involves is not just a detailed knowledge, but a sense of deep care and concern for that place.
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> To be attached to places and have profound ties with them is an important human need. (Relph, 1976, pp. 37–38)

Many voices tell us we must reconsider our relationship with Earth as our primordial place. This is possible because "places themselves are not stable, free-standing entities but continually shaped and reshaped by forces from both inside and outside" (Buell, 2001, p. 67), which means that, just as humans have started disconnecting themselves from the planet, the opposite can also happen.

When it comes to war, the characteristics of contemporary warfare – e.g. new and deadlier warfighting weapons, remotely piloted systems, the resurfacing of the nuclear threat – instill, to a certain extent, the feeling that everyone is at risk. In zones of active war, the creation of safe areas meant to protect civilians can make a difference between life and death. These areas are defined by Hering (2020, p. 286) as "a confined geographical space within a conflict zone in which at least one external actor or all belligerent parties effectively guarantee protection for civilians from a threat of conflict-related physical violence." Many people, however, try to escape these zones of conflict, and the still very militarized safe areas, and look for safety elsewhere. In these circumstances, they arguably reject the possibility of safe areas to seek safe places, a location where they can be kept (even if temporarily) out of harm's way and free of imminent threats.

Returning to the aforementioned definition of place as security developed by Tuan, then we can say that a safe place is a pleonastic formulation. The word "place" already carries in itself the idea of safety. So, why does it make sense to use this redundant expression? First, a common strategy in academic discourse implies the repetition of ideas for the sake of clarity and the proper assimilation of information. Following this reasoning, employing the term "safe place" serves the purpose of reinforcing our connection to it and its role as "home," a place of belonging. But it also makes evident how far we need to go in our current volatile circumstances where safety is deeply undermined. Second, the notion of safe place allows us to think about spaces whose primary meaning and objective is to be and feel safe, to preserve and protect. In this regard, even though safe places may differ in terms of size, who is included in them, historical context, and political and economic configurations, some ideas can be identified as pervading the multiple shapes and forms safe places can assume:

1) *Safe places protect from external forces and agents*. They provide safety to those who occupy it, thus functioning as a shield or a guard that blocks a potential threat coming from the outside.
2) *Safe places keep what/who is inside secure*. They provide shelter and ensure that no one is exposed to harm, danger or distress. They are free of hostile actions and ideas, thus allowing people to be vulnerable, surrender, and let their guard down.
3) *Safe places constitute spaces of care.* They are to be treasured and cherished and provide the conditions for someone to be cared for and valued. They comfort, encourage, and empower so that people can heal or uplift themselves.
4) *Safe places are reliable*. They are solid, steady, dependable, and trustworthy, even as they change and adapt. They provide assurance, a sense of belonging, and a firm ground to land on.

The articles that compose this special issue touch upon several of these topics and many others we did not initially consider. These texts, wide-ranging in disciplinary approach, methodological scope, style, and content, address different safe places and put forward diverse conceptions of (un)safety and place. They help not only test the relevance of the notion of a safe place in contemporary times but also expand on its meanings and applicability.

In "Tracing Exilience Through Literature and Translation: A Portuguese Gargantua in Paris (1848)," Rita Bueno Maia looks into how spaces are impacted by the experience of exilience, focusing specifically on Portuguese-language migrant writers and translators in mid-nineteenth-century Paris. Through the analysis of a rewriting of Rabelais' *Gargantua* in Portuguese as a "safe house" for groups of Portuguese-language exiles (marginalized in Paris and their homeland), the author argues for the important role of translation in coping

with displacement and identifies a double movement resulting from the exile in Paris: on the one hand, the changes imprinted onto the Parisian landscape materialized in the demand and supply of Portuguese books; on the other hand, the reimagination of the homeland through a nostalgic desire for a bygone Portugal.

Linda Koncz, in "Safe Places of Integration: Female Migrants from Eurasia in Lisbon, Portugal," presents part of the outcomes of the author's audiovisual storytelling research project on the needs and hopes of migrants living in Lisbon. The argument is built around the notion of integration. It not only highlights the centrality of this concept in contemporary debates concerning international migration but also emphasizes how such notion entails an immense range of meanings deriving from the wide diversity of migratory experiences. By using qualitative data obtained from individual interviews with migrants residing in the Portuguese capital, the author focuses on subjective narratives of a shared experience of migrating to a new country of residence, stressing the social and cultural aspects that shape a sense of safety in a new national environment as well as the challenges that unsettle that same condition of safety.

In "'We Are All the Sons of Abraham'? Utopian Performativity for Jewish-Arab Coexistence in an Israeli Reform Jewish *Mimouna* Celebration," Elazar Ben-Lulu and Naphtaly Shem-Tov present a detailed case study that discusses the possibility of coexistence through the ritualized performance of *Mimouna*, originally a festival celebrated among Jews in the Maghreb that came to be adopted by an Israeli Reform Jewish congregation. Using qualitative data gathered from participant observation and informal interviews, and drawing on contributions from Anthropology and Performance Studies, the authors discuss how new interpretations of the celebration undermined the possibility of the ritual performance to become a safe place for the emergence of a sense of shared existence between different groups.

In "Mnemotope as a Safe Place: The Wind Phone in Japan," *Clorinda Sissi Galasso* draws on the case of the unconnected telephone booth created by Itaru Sasaki and located in Ōtsuchi, Iwate Prefecture, to unveil how ordinary objects may become valuable vehicles of communication and mourning in contexts of personal and collective loss. The author explores the notion of "mnemotope," focusing on the interplay between place and memory and the way such connectedness enables the evocation of traumatic, complex, and painful memories and emotions. By using an autoethnographic approach, the author develops an immersive description and reflection on this particular safe mnemotope as a space of both remembrance and experience, a space that helps situate memories as much as it provides them with structures of feeling and meaning.

In "Into the Negative (Space): Images of War Across Generations in Portugal and Guinea-Bissau. Death is Not the End," Daniel Barroca brings together a personal and intimate reading of the author's family photo album containing pictures of the war in former Portuguese Guinea with a reflection on the physical encounter with Victor Bor, a djambakose (healer) of a village in Guinea-Bissau. The author finds a connection between the ghosts that inhabit both the photo album and the visions that inspire Bor, elaborating on the negative space one can find in those pictures and the healer's drawings/writings. This space is perceived as both transformative and unsafe, as it transports the past into the present in a violent way and captures the gaze of the viewer while also shaping it.

In "Dwelling in Active Serenity: Nature in Werner Herzog's Cinema," Haotian Wu investigates the nature–human relationship through the discussion of three films by Werner Herzog in light of Martin Heidegger's philosophy and his thoughts on human dwelling in nature and being at home with it. The author explores the notion of (un)safe nature through the reflection on the objectification of nature and its transformation into an exploitable resource in *Aguirre, the Wrath of God* (1972); the hostility of nature and its indifference to humans in *Grizzly Man* (2005); and finally, the balance between apathy and empathy, homeliness and unhomeliness in *Happy People: A Year in the Taiga* (2010). The term "active serenity" is offered by the author as a tool to talk about this balance and the state of dwelling.

Najmeh Moradiyan-Rizi tackles the theme of the American West in "Montana as Place of (Un)Belonging: Landscape, Identity, and the American West in *Bella Vista* (2014)." The author develops a close analysis of Vera Brunner-Sung's film *Bella Vista* to talk about recent reimaginations of the American West by women filmmakers, who rethink the ideas of masculinity, territoriality, and fixity often associated with that space. Brunner-Sung's film, the author argues, focuses instead on the relation between place, identity, and belonging through the story of English language instructor Dori who experiences Montana in a double and contradictory way: she is both at home and out of place.

Finally, in "Data that Should Not Have Been Given: Noise and Immunity in James Newitt's *HAVEN*," Ilios Willemars analyzes Newitt's digital video installation about an abandoned gun tower in the North Sea occupied by a family who takes possession of the space and declares it independent from the United Kingdom with the intent of setting up a pirate radio station. Through a close reading of the work, informed by the experience of watching *HAVEN*, and the critical discussion of the concepts of noise, immunity, and capture, the author questions the production of safe places. This is achieved through the exploration of the tower – coveted by outsiders, namely the group "cypherpunk" – as a data haven, i.e. a safe place to store and protect information, immune to territorial regulations, and external interference.

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